Budget 2020
Considerations Moving Forward

Council of Alberta University Students
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The Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS) represents over 100,000 post-secondary students from the Students’ Association of MacEwan University, the Students’ Association of Mount Royal University, the University of Alberta Students’ Union, the University of Calgary Students’ Union, and the University of Lethbridge Students’ Association.

Budget 2020 saw another cut to advanced education in our province. These new cuts are compounded with the in-year cuts from Budget 2019, including multiple changes that had a direct negative impact on post-secondary students, and the impending performance-based funding model, students are concerned about the continued quality and affordability of education in Alberta. We are calling on the Government of Alberta to take steps to strengthen the future of Alberta by prioritizing and investing in advanced education.

Students were disappointed with the lack of transparency in the budget announcement on February 27th. Specific details on program continuity, data on funding distribution, and other information was not available publicly as it has been in previous years. While students appreciated the opportunity to hear from the Minister over the phone following the budget announcement, it would have been more productive and transparent to additionally allow CAUS into the Budget Lock up as has been the situation in previous years. This would enable us to ask clarifying questions to Ministry staff as they are able to provide more details than what is present in the budget proper.
Considerations Moving Forward

CAUS continues to call on the government to prioritize three areas to ensure students are able to access, continue, and successfully complete their advanced education and be equipped with the skills necessary to graduate and contribute to Alberta's economy.

Mental Health

Although $8.8 million was allocated for the Campus Mental Health Grant, it is only for one year. Students across the province need predictable and equitable funding for on-campus mental health support programs beyond a single year. CAUS has repeatedly called for an increase in funding to the same per-student levels previously in place at the University of Lethbridge, approximately $175 per student in 2020 dollars. This value should continue to be adjusted for inflation in the coming years.

Instead, Budget 2020 sees the University of Lethbridge and the University of Calgary experiencing cuts to their allocation of mental health funding. Additionally, the budget did not account for anticipated enrollment growth in 2020/21, nor did it account for increased costs for goods and services due to inflation. The campus mental health grant funding has effectively been cut by not accounting for both population growth and inflation.

CAUS calls on the Government of Alberta to prioritize the well-being of young Albertans by implementing a per-student funding model across institutions, indexed to inflation, starting at $175 per student for a minimum three-year term.

Financial Aid

We are also concerned with the funding changes made to Student Financial Aid. Funding for Scholarships, Awards, and Grants have decreased by approximately $8 million. Additionally, an additional $13 million has been allocated to Student Loans. Statistics Canada shows that students are graduating with more and more debt, currently an average of $30,000. CAUS believes that focusing so heavily on loans discourages students from attending or continuing due to the amount of debt they would be shouldering.

Loans cannot be the main form of financial aid offered, as they are a blunt instrument incapable of ensuring post-secondary education remains accessible and affordable for Alberta students. Upfront needs-based grants have been discussed as a preferred funding option as they are targeted to those who need them most, are transparent, and are received when the funds are needed most. It is disappointing to see that neither scholarships and awards nor grants were increased in Budget 2020 despite discussing the importance of this type of funding.
Students support upfront, needs-based financial aid as it will directly benefit students who would otherwise not be able to attend post-secondary. This is especially important for first-generation students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Many families may not be able to take on more debt to enroll their students, and support them to graduation. Student debt is Family debt. Given that tuition is still allowed to increase by 7% per year for the next three years, upfront needs-based grants will continue to grow in importance.

With the increases to tuition and fees expected over the next three years, CAUS calls on the Government of Alberta to invest in scholarships and grants as opposed to loans to ensure post-secondary education remains accessible for all Albertans.

Sexual Violence--Emphasizing a Holistic Approach

In order to adequately address campus sexual violence, we need a holistic approach. From education and prevention to standardized policies on reporting and increased services, we continue to call on the Government of Alberta to consider all of our policy recommendations in the development of a more holistic approach to combating campus sexual violence. All of the following policy recommendations have been presented to the Minister of Advanced Education and the Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women on January 29th 2020.

The policy recommendations are as follows:

- Assess and measure the prevalence of campus sexual violence in Alberta by developing and administering a yearly, institution-specific student survey, with the provision of grant funding linked to the successful roll-out of the survey.
- Ensure all institutions have robust sexual violence policies and procedures by creating a provincial framework in collaboration with campus sexual violence specialists, student representatives, post-secondary institutions, and other key stakeholders.
- Allocate consistent and adequate funding towards efforts focused specifically on training and prevention of sexual violence on Alberta’s campuses.
- Work with individual post-secondary institutions and commit to consistent and sufficient funding for the most appropriate support services dedicated to anyone affected by campus sexual violence.
- Fund the development of online-based training that institutions can use as a baseline to educate their campus staff and faculty on effective and supportive responses to sexual violence disclosures.

Responding to and addressing CSV requires a comprehensive and holistic approach to ensure that no matter what PSI a student decides to attend in Alberta they will be free of the threat of sexual violence.